

Woman of substance

The *seductive* Countess from Kirribilli

WORDS *by* JOYCE MORGAN



Elizabeth von Arnim was the free-spirited literary sensation born in Sydney who went on to live a mysterious, scandalous and glamorous life amid Europe's aristocracy. This is her story.

The young bride stepped out of a London church on a frigid February day in 1891. She shivered in her ivory gown of satin and old lace as she paused on the cold stone steps. The damp end of winter was not a romantic time to wed.

She had little time to linger. Within hours, she was on a train with her middle-aged husband to his Berlin home. Miss Beauchamp, a merchant's daughter, was now the Countess von Arnim.

The 24-year-old had already travelled far from her Australian birthplace. She would travel much further. She would beguile high-society and become an international literary sensation known today as Elizabeth von Arnim.

Although barely 1.5 metres tall – at first glance she was often mistaken for a child – Elizabeth had a formidable presence with blue eyes as penetrating as her wit.

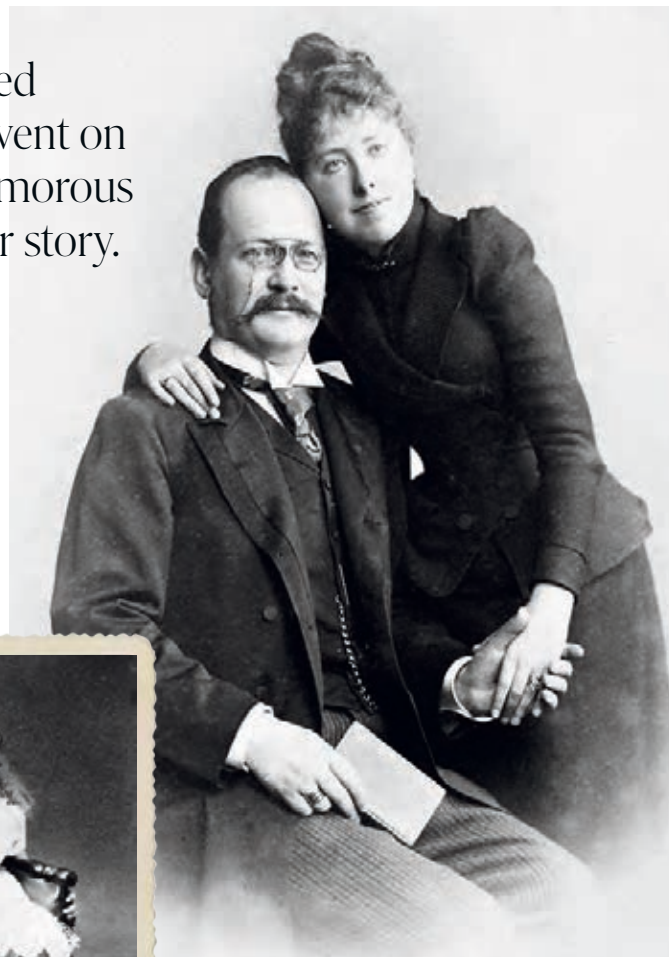
“When one meets her, inevitably she suggests Dresden China, with her tiny voice, tiny hands, tiny manners. And then suddenly, with a shock, you realise that the Dresden China is hollow, and is filled with gunpowder,” author Beverley Nichols wrote of her. Elizabeth created around her the atmosphere of a court at which her friends were either in favour or disgrace. She could be kind and cruel. She was a mix of dove and serpent, her father once noted.

Elizabeth would draw into her orbit aristocrats and artists, among them writer H.G. Wells, with whom it was rumoured she had a tempestuous affair. But she would know deep despair and flee for her life in the face of domestic cruelty and political tyranny.

She was born Mary Annette Beauchamp in Sydney in 1866 to a Tasmanian mother and English-born father, a prosperous shipping merchant. Elizabeth (who changed her name as an adult) spent her infancy at Kirribilli Point, where the Beauchamps lived in one of the elegant villas that once dotted its rocky foreshore.

The family moved to England in 1870, where Elizabeth became a studious, musical and independent young woman, who showed little interest in marriage and domesticity.

On a grand tour to Italy, she met Count Henning von Arnim at a musical soiree. He was 15 years older than her,



Elizabeth with Count Henning von Arnim, who she met at a musical soiree. He proposed within weeks. Left: She spent her infancy in Sydney.

a Pomeranian aristocrat with an estate near the Baltic Sea. Within weeks, atop the Duomo in Florence, he proposed to her.

Elizabeth's mother, Louey, who had a hard-scrabble girlhood on a farm near Launceston, was delighted. But soon she worried that colonial-born Elizabeth was marrying above her class. And when the Count seemed reluctant to set a wedding date, Louey's anxieties increased.

Back in London, Elizabeth was launched into society. She entered the drawing room at Buckingham Palace in a floor-length gown from which flowed a three-yard train. In her brunette hair, two ostrich feathers swayed as she curtsied before Queen Victoria. Presentation at court was a greatly anticipated rite of passage for well-bred young women, an entrée to fashionable society.

Elizabeth's court debut may have been a way to force the Count's hand, or insurance if the romance toppled. Henning soon set a date and whisked her up the aisle. Her married life was privileged, with balls, embassy dinners and opera concerts, but no fairytale. Elizabeth struggled to fit into formal Germanic society, with its strict rules of behaviour.

She was ill-prepared for motherhood and traumatised by the agonising birth of her first child. Elizabeth begged for pain relief, but her pleas were dismissed as weakness. She was left exhausted and likely suffered post-natal depression. But soon she was pregnant again. And again.

Within three years of marriage she was the mother of three girls. She knew there would be no end to childbearing until she had produced the son her husband demanded. It became the source of conflict.

“[Henning] and I quarrelled, he wanting a baby and I not seeing it,” she wrote in her diary.

When she visited Henning’s remote Pomeranian estate she seized the chance for a life away from Berlin’s unceasing obligations. She turned a derelict 17th century former convent on the 8000-acre estate into a family home. Henning was often absent on business, and she loved the solitude as she wandered among beech forest.

“There is nothing so absolutely bracing for the soul as the frequent turning of one’s back on duties,” she wrote.

Literary hit

She began her first book. *Elizabeth and her German Garden* was a light-hearted chronicle loosely based on her Pomeranian life. In it, she fictionalised her three daughters as the April, May and June babies and satirised her husband, dubbing him the Man of Wrath. She published it anonymously since it was not considered acceptable for a Pomeranian Countess to sully her hands earning money from writing books.

It became an international bestseller. She followed up with several more. By 1900 newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic were gripped by who this mysterious author was. Fiercely private, she wanted as little known about herself as possible. She lied and obfuscated to keep her identity hidden. Even when it later became known, she never published under her full name.

Elizabeth bore Henning five children – four girls and finally a son – but had little in common with her husband. She was a mercurial spirit married to a man whose chief interest were his pigs and potatoes. Nonetheless when Henning died in 1910, she was devastated.

With the estate sold to pay debts, she was the sole breadwinner. She channelled her whirlwind energy into book after bestselling book. Her writing was profitable and her greatest joy.



“I’m glad God made me a scribbler instead of anything else. How I’d have hated it if I’d had a passion, say, for cooking,” she wrote to a friend.

Reviewers often compared her with Jane Austen, for her social satire. But the Jane Austen from the antipodes had more bite. With her light touch, Elizabeth tackled tough subjects – from adultery to the frustrations of marriage and motherhood – that even today seem ahead of her time.

With the success of her books, she built a 16-bedroom chalet in Switzerland with views of Mont Blanc. Frequently in London, she mixed in glittering social and literary circles that included Lady Maud Cunard, Nancy Astor, Lady Randolph Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, Henry James and E.M. Forster, who had tutored her children.

She abhorred dullness, in books or people. “Nothing will induce me to read a thing – anything – not even God’s first novel, if it bores me,” she wrote to a friend.

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Clockwise from above: With writer H.G. Wells; entertaining in the 1920s; the 16-bedroom Swiss chalet; second husband 2nd Earl Russell; the Countess in 1905; with her daughters.



“She was so terrifying to some men they trembled and collapsed.”

And when a guest talked at length about a military man who had been wounded in 16 places, Elizabeth silenced the dinner table with her retort: “I didn’t know men had so many places”.

Some feared her. As writer Frank Swinnerton noted: “She was so terrifying to some men that they trembled under the gaze of her prominent, merciless pale blue eyes, and collapsed altogether before the demurely drawing boldness of her tongue.”

Love affairs

Others were captivated, among them H.G. Wells. In the wake of her widowhood, Elizabeth developed a tempestuous relationship with author of *The War of the Worlds* and *The Invisible Man*. Wells was married, but

practised assiduously the free love he preached.

Years later, Wells claimed his affair with Elizabeth was so energetic they broke hotel beds – twice. The nature of their relationship is unclear. Elizabeth said nothing publicly. But her journal chronicled blazing rows and teary reconciliations of such intensity that it is hard to image their relationship was simply platonic.

When her friendship with Wells ended, Elizabeth soon found consolation. It arrived in the large, blustery form of John Francis ‘Frank’ Russell, the 2nd Earl Russell. Dubbed the Wicked Earl, he was the older brother of philosopher Bertrand Russell. Frank was also a convicted bigamist.

Frank was still married and she considered him perfect lover material. She had not anticipated that he would suddenly divorce his wife and propose. Despite warnings from friends, Elizabeth married him in 1916. She became the Countess Russell.

By then, World War I was underway, and it would tear Elizabeth’s Anglo-German family apart. Her youngest daughter, at school in Germany, was stranded. Worse was to come. Within months of her marriage to Frank, Elizabeth learned the 16-year-old had died there of pneumonia. Elizabeth’s grief was compounded by the memory of

their last parting, amid rows over the teenager’s behaviour.

“I got down to the very dregs today of hopeless misery,” Elizabeth wrote after she received the tragic news.

If Elizabeth hoped for consolation from Frank, it was in vain. His gambling and moods increased, possibly exacerbated by dabbling with cocaine. He berated her and controlled her movements. She had to ask his permission to go for a walk. The once-independent, free-spirited Elizabeth had vanished. Almost.

She fled her marriage in 1919, and penned a dark, gothic novel, *Vera*, that left London’s clubs and salons agog. Many recognised in her portrait of a troubled marriage and a domestic tyrant the figure of Frank Russell. Frank certainly did. He threatened to sue.

Elizabeth resolved never to marry again. But romance?

“She is the most fascinating small human being I have ever known.”

Well, that was different. She was in her fifties when a handsome young Cambridge graduate arrived to help catalogue her library. They soon became lovers. Elizabeth knew she and Alexander Stuart Frere, later a prominent publisher, had no long-term future. Nonetheless, she spent most of the Roaring Twenties with a man nearly three decades her junior.

Throughout that heady decade, she invited artists, writers, musicians, politicians and philosophers to join her at the chalet. She also became friends with her young New Zealand-born cousin, writer Katherine Mansfield, who moved nearby. Katherine, who was already suffering the tuberculosis that would kill her, was enchanted by Elizabeth, who visited frequently bringing gifts of flowers and books.

“She appeared today behind a bouquet – never smaller woman carried bigger bouquet,” Katherine wrote to a friend. “She is certainly the most fascinating small human being I have ever known – a real enchantress – and she is lovely to look upon as well as hear.”

But theirs was a tetchy friendship. Katherine was furious when Elizabeth made a clumsy comment about one of the younger woman’s short stories. Elizabeth, who was rarely intimidated by anyone, acknowledged later that she was often ill-at-ease in Katherine’s company. When Katherine died at 34, Elizabeth was comforted to learn that her cousin had dedicated a volume of poems to her.

Glamorous Riviera

The French Riviera became a glamorous mecca for artists and aristocrats in the wake of the First World War. Pablo Picasso, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Coco Chanel were among those drawn to its Mediterranean beauty. So too was Elizabeth, who had wearied of snow-bound winters at the chalet.

She bought a farmhouse in the hills behind Cannes and by the early 1930s was swept up in a social whirl. She dined with the Aga Khan, media baron Lord Beaverbrook and Somerset Maugham. She called on Rudyard Kipling and



Above: Elizabeth in 1940, a year before she died in South Carolina aged 74. Right: With much younger lover Alexander Stuart Frere in the '20s.



swam with *Winnie-the-Pooh*’s illustrator E. H. Shepard.

But soon the political storm clouds gathered across Europe once more. She listened in horror to Hitler’s broadcasts on her radio. All her life she had loathed tyranny – domestic and political. She contemplated suicide rather than live under an advancing Nazi regime, before resolving to flee.

She sailed to America, living out of a suitcase like a well-heeled gypsy. Americans warmed to the Countess. Glossy magazines paid court. So did Hollywood, which snapped up her latest book, *Mr Skeffington*. Elizabeth didn’t live to see Oscar-nominated Bette Davis star in it. Nor did she see her most romantic novel *The Enchanted April* (also a film) rediscovered during the pandemic as *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and *Vanity Fair* all found in it a balm for troubled times.

Elizabeth died in South Carolina, aged 74, in 1941 after contracting flu. Newspapers hailed her 21 semi-



autobiographical books as some of the wittiest in the English language. But one friend wrote candidly to another about Elizabeth’s quicksilver spirit: “What a devil she was, but what good company!”. **AWW**

Joyce Morgan is the author of The Countess from Kirribilli, Allen & Unwin. On sale July 1.